

A Full-Throated Farewell



Bellini's 'Il pirata' brings down the curtain on 20 years of bel canto opera at Caramoor

By *Heidi Waleson*
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Angela Meade, soprano, performing in 'Il pirata' by Bellini with Will Crutchfield, conductor, Orchestra of St. Luke's, and the Bel Canto Young Artists at Caramoor PHOTO: GABE PALACIO

Bel Canto at Caramoor, which ends this summer after 20 years, has provided a valuable service to opera lovers, presenting increasingly well-prepared, carefully cast concert performances of obscure works, most of them by the “bel canto” trio of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini, but with some stylistically related titles as well. Its indefatigable music director, Will Crutchfield, chose pieces that are all about singing, and coached the soloists and supporting artists to fulfill his vision.

With few or no production elements to distract the audience, which also had minimal familiarity to fall back on, these operas were set up to be judged purely on vocal skill. Some notable voices have participated—the mezzo Vivica Genaux was an early find—and some of the operas have since found their way into more conventional houses.

On Saturday, Bellini's “Il pirata” (1827) ended the opera series (there are two other concerts this month) with a bang, fielding three singers who treated Bellini's vocal challenges like child's play and made its creaky, melodramatic plot actually seem like a story about real people. In brief: A Duke, Ernesto, has defeated and exiled his enemy, Gualtiero, and forcibly married Gualtiero's beloved, Imogene.

When the opera begins, it is years later. Gualtiero has become a pirate and his ship is wrecked in Ernesto's domain. The ex-lovers meet, their feelings as strong as ever, but there is no hope for their future. Bellini's settings of the encounters and confrontations among these three characters have a fascinating complexity: passion and anger, certainly, but also deeply felt bitterness and resignation.

Mr. Crutchfield scooped up the soprano Angela Meade early in her meteoric career—she won the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions in 2007 and made her Met debut as Elvira in “Ernani” in 2008—and cast her

in the title roles of “Semiramide” in 2009 and “Norma” in 2010. For the unhappy Imogene, her fifth starring role at Caramoor, everything in Ms. Meade’s sumptuous instrument and artistic temperament came together. Her soprano has a bright, steely sheen; her remarkable breath control enables her to spin out long, eloquent lines; and she moves easily around her wide range, leaping effortlessly into her upper register. In earlier performances, she could frequently sound technically perfect but a bit automatic; here, she was entirely believable, communicating Imogene’s terror and distress, her contempt for her husband, and the sadness of her love for Gualtiero, which is for “a buried man.” Her excellent diction, particularly in the shapely delivery of the accompanied recitatives, was also a plus.

Santiago Ballerini’s focused, exciting tenor showed no signs of strain in the role of Gualtiero, easily displaying the explosive fury of a man who has contained his desires for too long. He and Ms. Meade were splendidly matched in their two duets. Yet their finest moments were a pair of spectacularly sung back-to-back arias in the opera’s final scene, both accompanied by mournful woodwind solos: First, Gualtiero, who has killed Ernesto in a duel, sadly surrenders himself to judgment; then Imogene, in an unusually contained mad scene, gives herself up to despair. As the heavy in this triangle, bass Harold Wilson brought a ferocious, macho character to Ernesto.

The supporting roles—filling out the all-important sextets—were ably taken by Robyn Marie Lamp as Imogene’s companion, Adele ; Joseph Beutel as the hermit, Goffredo; and especially Sean Christensen, who has a very pretty tenor, as Gualtiero’s lieutenant, Itulbo. They are all members of the Bel Canto Young Artists program; other program participants supplied the rousing chorus numbers. Mr. Crutchfield led the Orchestra of St. Luke’s in a sensitive, elegantly shaped performance that found the score’s elegiac qualities as well as its fire. For next summer, Mr. Crutchfield plans to move his bel canto operation to SUNY Purchase; Caramoor will present touring productions, such as San Francisco’s Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra performing Handel’s “Atalanta.”

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.